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A LECTURE

—BY—

FELIX ADLER, PH. D.,

BEFORE THE

SOCIETY FOR ETHICAL CULTURE,

Sunday, April 6th, 1879.

PRICE, FIFTEEN CENTS.

NEW YORK:

Co-operative Printers' Association, 122 Fulton St.  
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THERE is an intense desire among the many to obtain some satisfactory solution of the ultimate problems of faith. There comes a time when the youth and the maiden find the faith of their childhood escaping them—find that what they had hitherto deemed indisputable facts are swathed in nebulous doubts, and that the stars in the firmament of the soul are veiled. Some there are, and these the majority, who after a brief and useless struggle simply yield to the state of uncertainty, and for the remainder of their lives continue to halt between two thresholds. But others, more sincere and earnest by nature, resolve to push forward toward clear convictions at whatever cost to themselves; and these struggling souls we heartily honor, and for their sake we deem it right that every one who has himself passed through the sea of doubt should hoist his flag and kindle his signal-light upon the eminence to which he may have attained, in order that he may warn off from the rocks those who are still tossed amid the surges of the sea, and show the swimmers where they can land upon the shore of safety.

There is a profound popular prejudice against radical innovation in religion. To some extent I sympathize with this prejudice. If we put away the intoxications and illusions of the passing moment, and regard human life as it is, how little satisfactory often seems the condition of things that meets our candid scrutiny. What is the issue of all our

toil? we are likely to ask, and what its permanent advantage? Even the most confirmed pleasure-seeker, the most lethargic epicurean, the most engrossed money-getter, must at times become aware of the hollowness and vanity of his accustomed occupations. When nature's stillness thrills us; when in some meditative night the mute eloquence of a far-spreading landscape touches deep chords of the inward life; when in moments of joy or sorrow—for both make us sincere—we are lifted above routine; how pitiable, then, appear the objects for which the great struggle goes on! Here is one whose only aim is wealth; to inhabit a palatial mansion, in which every article of use or ornament shall be of rare excellence, is his aim, the purpose of a lifetime! There is another who hunts after the bauble fame, to be crowned forsooth by fickle fortune for a day, to have his deeds blazoned forth by rumor, to leave among late descendants the shadowy memory of a name! And even when the aims which men set themselves are more noble, how seldom are they reached! Our life remains such a mere broken fragment, our endeavors are at best so quickly cut off, our destiny is so little that we must needs bind it to a larger destiny. That alone can reconcile us to existence, that we look upon it as the means of fulfilling a purpose wholly worthy of the greatest sufferings, the hardest sacrifices, as a link in a chain. A link regarded in itself may be petty and insignificant, but if we remember that it makes the indispensable connection between innumerable links like itself, all joining to form an endless glorious chain, then how unspeakably great may become the importance even of the smallest link. And so our life shall be regarded as a link in the chain of generations, our existence as a scale on the ladder of perfection. I have said that in moments of



exaltation the common objects of life appear despicable. There is one object, however, whose transcendent value shines out with all the brighter lustre the more the others are obscured ; and this is *the subjection of the soul to the moral law*. The laws of nature cannot compare with the moral law ; the wonders exhibited by astronomy, the distances of the fixed stars, the infinity of worlds, the sweep of the planets in their orbits through millions and millions of miles, the regularity with which they return unswervingly along their paths through the immensities, the inexpressible grandeur of the material universe dwindle beside the grandeur of the human soul in its sense of responsibility in guilt and goodness.

Now, while the common people do not clearly appreciate, they yet dimly feel the sublime value which the law of righteousness gives to our lives, and they cling to the belief in a moral order, perceiving truly that human life would become wholly intolerable if we indeed believed ourselves to be blown about by winds of chance, the sport of blind forces that wound and pain and crush and grind to no purpose, with no compensating good to be achieved by so much suffering. The natural feelings of mankind, on this account, revolt against the doctrine of chance in any guise, and the people are justified in declaring him an enemy of the human race who lessens the respect in which the eternal ethical values are held. But if we are thus cheered to behold men, even in their outbursts of fanaticism, moved by the desire to protect what is really sacred, it is, on the other hand, inexpressibly saddening to perceive that owing to ignorance and superstition they constantly mistake the best friends of the good for its foes, and, like wild beasts, turn to rend their truest benefactors. “ There is a time to act for the Lord by

breaking his commandments," was a current saying among the ancient Hebrews. That means there is a time to act for religion by protesting against what is named religion; there is a time to prepare for a larger morality by dashing to atoms the too narrow forms of dogma in which the morality of the age is preserved. But the multitude understand not this necessity, feel not the breath of the larger freedom that comes to them amid the discords of innovation, as the spring comes amid showers and storms. And thus it happens that the most religious souls have ever been persecuted in the name of religion, and that the enthusiasts of morality have been execrated as destroyers of the good.

During the coming week will be celebrated once again the sacrifice and death of the Nazarene. Throughout the broad domain of Christendom there are solemn pageants at this season; the churches are in mourning; weary, melancholy chants harrow the hearts of the devotees; they macerate their flesh and confess their sins in honor of the slain Son of God. Say not Son of God, but son of man. Read in the story of his life and death the pathetic tale of an impassioned teacher who yearned to be a helper to the wretched, a child-like nature that reproduced in itself the grace and loveliness of childhood, the preacher of a grander virtue than his people were ripe for. He died at "the Tyburn of his nation" the death of a criminal because he had the aspirations of an angel. But not he only. Countless others have suffered like him in the public pillory or on the scaffold or on the rack of secret inward agonies, simply because their religion was too fine for the gross masses that hunted them down, to understand. Was there ever a more magnanimous, genial, healthful nature than that of Socrates? Others might be prudent;



he was wise. For there is a difference between prudence and wisdom, in that prudence selects right means to any end, but wisdom selects great ends only and right means to those ends. The accusers of Socrates were prudent in that they compassed his death, but he was wise in that he yielded his life for the sake of the laws. Hardly can words be found in the literature of any people so simple and yet so sated with the rich sap of truth as those with which Socrates met his judges. He would not weep and supplicate for life, as they desired him to do; that were unworthy. He would not cease from discoursing on virtue, as they demanded, because virtue is the very life of life. He would not throw away his convictions, because he said: "I am a soldier, and a soldier must not throw away his weapons, and my convictions are my weapons." He said: "I am an old man and slow in my walk. Now, there are two evils that pursue men, the one is death and the other guilt, and death is slower than guilt; therefore I, being slow, have been overtaken by the slower of the pursuers, but my enemies, being hasty and violent, have been overtaken by the swifter. I, therefore, am the captive of death, but they shall be known as the captives of guilt forever." A man capable of such sentiments, a man who when his prison door was opened would not pass through that door to liberty, because he said, "It is better that an unjust law shall be fulfilled and I perish rather than that I be preserved and the law-abiding spirit of the people take injury through my example"—this man, therefore, was accused and condemned to drink his own death from the hemlock cup on the charge of Atheism.

And the same charge of Atheism, friends, has been launched against unnumbered others, even against men like

Sir Isaac Newton and La Place. The epithet "Atheist" is a poisoned missile; it wounds not only, but leaves the wound it makes to rankle and spread its venom. The charge of Atheism is used with fatal effect to inflame the fears of the populace; then all reason is at an end, then a cloud of prejudice obscures the real merits of the question at issue, then fierce discord is introduced into the bosom of families, while the designing malice which has created all this confusion in all likelihood fattens on the follies of those whom it has duped. There ought to be some means of putting a check upon the dangerous and often knavish misuse of the term Atheism, and I think one of the surest means to effect this object will be to examine what may be the grounds on which Theism rests and what per contrast is the proper signification of Atheism.

There are three leading theories of the universe. The first is Theism, affirming that the world was created by an Eternal Being, that there was a time when the world did not exist and that it was called into existence by the fiat of a personal God.

The second is Pantheism, affirming that the world existed from eternity, even as God has existed from eternity, and that God pervades the world as the soul pervades the body.

The last is Atheism, affirming that the world is given over to the rule of *chance*.

If now we examine the grounds on which Theism rests—I shall endeavor to give the Kantian metaphysical statement in as plain language as possible—we find that there are three great arguments to which all other arguments for the existence of God are reducible. The first may be called *the*

*argument from perfection* ; the second, *the argument from the necessity of a First Cause* ; and the third, *the argument from the marks of design in nature*.

The argument from perfection runs as follows : There is possible to the mind of man and arises within him in moments of meditation the conception of a *perfect Being* free from all the weaknesses which we detect in ourselves, a Being not hampered by the limitations of time and space, whose power is unrestricted, therefore called omnipotent ; whose knowledge is unbounded, therefore called omniscient ; a Being that feels no pain, no, nor the unrestful bounding of the emotions in joy ; a Being that remains in absolute repose and yet sheds beneficent influence round about him, even as the sun sheds its rays, and however many the eyes that drink them in, its light is not thereby diminished. Now, therefore, if we have in our minds the conception of a Being including within himself the perfection of all qualities, it follows that this Being must also possess the quality of existence ; for if he did not possess the quality of existence, then would he be imperfect in so far as he lacked that quality. But we have started with the conception of a perfect Being, hence the conclusion follows that *God* exists.

It is indeed surprising that an argument of this kind should have maintained so respectable a position among thinking persons for so long a time as this really has. It was first put forth by Anselmus of Canterbury, a famous divine of the Middle Ages ; has since been repeated, parrot-like, by hosts of his followers, and is still paraded with great unction in modern text-books and encyclopedias. But the argument is a shallow sophism, and the fatal flaw is easily perceived. It is this : simply that existence is not a quality,



but a condition—a condition which may or may not belong to any conception of the mind, even as experience, and experience alone can demonstrate. Thus, we may have in our minds an absolutely accurate conception of the fabulous island of the “Grail,” or of the Golden City, or of fairyland ; yet the fact that we have a complete conception of these places does not at all prove that they exist. Kant has crushed the argument from perfection by simply remarking that we may have in our mind a perfectly complete and accurate conception of an hundred dollars, and of course in like manner of a million dollars, but that the perfection and accuracy of our conception will not place even a single coin into our purse. Thus, too, we may have a perfect and accurate conception of a Divine Being—a conception, moreover, which shall be as grand and inspiring as you will—and yet the mere fact that we have this conception in mind does not at all prove that there corresponds to it a reality outside of our minds.

The second argument for the existence of God is that from the necessity of a *First Cause*. I have before alluded to this argument, but it will be necessary to repeat my statement, for it is important that it should be grasped clearly.

There is no effect without a cause. If you hear a footstep on the stair, you know some one is coming ; if you hear thunder, you know there are electrical discharges. If you see ice, you know there has been cold. If you behold the first flowers raise their inquisitive heads, you know spring is coming. Now look at the great aggregate of causes and effects. The mind asks of this effect what is its cause, and the cause of that cause, and the cause of that, and on, and on, and on, until we grow dizzy, being whirled away into this maelstrom of causation, and spinning round and round in

interminable circles, and it seems like madness coming over us. Then by a superhuman effort we seek to free ourselves, and struggle to lay hold of some firm point, and we say—First Cause, thereon we will rest. And for a while we rest, but after a time returns that inevitable question once more, and lo, Mephistopheles at our elbow nods and smiles, and says, “And pray, sir, since you have found the First Cause, what is the cause of that cause?” If God made the world, what God made God, and what God that God? And so once more, and madder and wilder than before, the whirl of thoughts goes on, and we find no exit.

And then there is another answer which has been given to the argument for a First Cause. Whenever a cause is present its effect must immediately follow. Fire melts wax; when fire is present and applied to wax, wax must melt. There can be no break in time between the presence of the cause and its efficiency. Now, if God is the cause and the world is His effect, then as soon as God existed the world must have followed. But God existed from eternity; therefore the world also was from eternity. And thus again the whole notion of cause and effect as applied to the Infinite proves self-contradictory and explodes.

The third and by far the most fascinating and popular argument for the existence of God is that from the marks of design in nature. If you see a table you say some one must have made it. If you enter a house with well-fashioned apartments designed for certain uses, with ornaments exhibiting a certain style, you will say some one must have built this house; nor could any one persuade you that the materials of the house could have put themselves together of their own accord. Now, if this is true of a table and a house, if



the table has its maker and the house its builder, how much more must it be true that the world had its maker and that this vast structure of the universe had its builder? In modern times the argument from the marks of design in nature has been vigorously assailed by the followers of Darwin. The Darwinist says to the theologian: "You misread nature. What you interpret as marks of design, as evidence of an intelligence that consciously adapts means to ends, is in reality no more than a chance result cast up in the course of the struggle for existence, and can be explained by the law of the survival of the fittest."

I am not prepared to speak upon the question of Darwinism. I deem it the duty of the layman in matters of science to accept what the most competent authorities affirm to be true. Still it does not seem to me that the absence of design or of a purpose in the construction of the universe can be established in the manner indicated. For however great the play of accident may be within certain limits, this at least will be conceded, this at least seems undeniable—that higher and higher forms are evolved in the course of the struggle for existence, and the fact that *higher* forms should be evolved is not explained by accident and the *ascending* line of evolution is not intelligible upon the assumption of chance. At the same time the argument from design has never been demonstrated and I am quite sure will never be demonstrated. Grant even that we do find in nature the marks of an adapting intelligence, what then? Call God the Master Architect, but what is the office of the architect? To order, to arrange, to join in forms of beauty and utility the material which he has ready at hand. But who has ever heard that an architect creates

also the material which he uses? Therefore even if God could be demonstrated as the Architect of Nature that would not yet at all prove him the Creator of Nature. And more, if we reason backward from external facts to their originator or fashioner, we are at liberty to ascribe to Him only so much intelligence, wisdom, goodness as the facts actually exhibit. Now regard the facts in a spirit of straightforward sincerity. True, he might be called a thankless clown who could deny that there is much that is noble and beautiful in the world. Who that has ever seen the glory of lake and hills and stars and sea could deny it? Who that has ever felt the liberating wind blow about him, or rising from his sleep has gone forth on some early morning in the spring and heard the thousand birds send up their carols, and felt as it were sympathetically the universal growth around him, but must have experienced what a luxury mere existence sometimes is? And if we regard the world of the Human, the endless wealth of friendship, the ecstatic affinities of love, the divine joys of maternity—if we ponder these things how are we moved to exclaim in gladness, “The world is beautiful indeed.” But again I raise my warning, a warning that may sound harshly enough in many an ear, saying, let us be honest. There is a black counterpart to the picture; this also let us consider. For happiness, then, man was created! Is it for the happiness of their peoples that the plague has devastated the blighted countries of the East? Was it for the happiness of the inhabitants that the floods poured over Szegedin? Was it for their happiness that China, India and Egypt have been swept by famine, and such hecatombs of victims have been heaped up that the imagination halts in blank stupor before the enormity of the figures? Or, tell me,

is it for our happiness that nature has invented that endless variety of pains that rack the human body in sickness, giving such prolonged and subtle torture as the ingenuity of no Torquemada has ever sufficed to rival. Or, transcending all other forms of ill, is it for human happiness that the throne of reason is sometimes shaken, when we say better a thousand times dead than thus, thus dead in life, when the truest and noblest and best sink to a condition more helpless than that of a child, and those who cling to them raise in vain their piteous cry to heaven, saying, "Great God, good God, canst thou thus strike us down?" Arraign Nature, charge her with her enormities. Why does she slay the worthiest whom we can least afford to lose and preserve the wretches who are a burden to themselves, a disgrace to others? Of what avail is it that beauty does exist when the great multitude are tied down to their tasks and cannot appreciate it. Of what avail are all the splendors of the scene when the fiends of grief clutch the heart and the spiritual eye is darkened? Pondering on these things the soul dwells in night and the Tartarus of despair seems yawning to engulf us. To such a result the argument from design has led us. It is a vain argument, it cannot prove its point. No more than it is possible to plant one's foot upon the solid earth and with the crown of the head to touch the sky, no more is it possible to stand on nature and reach God.

The argument from perfection has failed. The argument from the necessity of a First Cause is inconclusive. The argument from design plunges us only into the quagmire of a deeper doubt.

But what follows from this? Only that which all theology nominally concedes, but which we take in its strictly



literal meaning—namely, that the finite reason of men is incapable of grasping the Infinite; that the standards which we employ with such signal success within the universe prove valueless when we attempt to get out of and beyond the universe; that the idea of cause and effect is a bridge which, as we travel among the mountains of experience, takes us safely over many a chasm, but when we reach the verge of the eternities falls lamentably short. Arrived at that far station, we see a rainbow arch spanning the vast abyss, cheering and hope-giving to behold. But vain indeed would he be who should attempt to walk out into the yawning gulf, hoping to mount into heaven along that shining but insubstantial causeway. Is there, then, no certainty? Have we no firm convictions concerning the Highest which will prove our safeguard in the perilous struggles of life? There is, indeed, such a safeguard, and earnestly and with my whole soul have I sought to point out how it may be secured. To the common people the name of God stands for something gross, material—a Being whom they can approach with their thought, whom they can almost feel with their senses. But the deeper and finer religious natures have at all times felt that the understanding utterly fails before the conception of the Supreme. They knew they could not describe or define their God with their intellects. They thought of Him as of a great Light, in which all vision is lost; they strove in rhapsodical language and by signs and tokens to indicate the streaming forth of their emotions into an ocean of all love. It is marvellous how religious men of all creeds and of no creed agree in the essential feelings that accompany their convictions—St. John of the Cross, Thomas a Kempis, Tauler in the fourteenth century, the

Hebrew prophets, the modern infidel! It is ever the little that rises to be redeemed in the great, the limited that aspires unto the unlimited, the confined power of self that is made free and pure by merging in the mightier power that surges and billows throughout the universe. But this emotional experience, subduing the soul of him whom it seizes, producing often revulsions of feeling and changes in character for a lifetime, even because it is so profound, is dim. And we require a clear message concerning that supersensual order whereof our moral nature bears testimony. We desire to know upon what grounds of reason the conviction of the existence of such a "higher world" may be made to rest.

Modern philosophy has shown and modern science confirms that all that which seems to us most real is but the shadow of an existence behind it. The grass, the meadows, the everlasting hills, the solid planet, the hard stone, are but images in a mirror, and the mirror is our soul. We see beautiful colors of flowers, but unimaginable beauty escapes us because our vision is not fine enough to receive it. We hear ravishing sounds, but the physicist proves that there are numberless air-waves which we never appreciate, because the instrument of our ear is not fitted to translate them into tones. The outside world and its thousandfold phenomena knock at the antechambers of the soul, and are received by the senses, that are the ushers of the inward life. And these usher in whomsoever it pleaseth them, and we are wholly dependent on their service. And yet, though we can never penetrate to things outward, but remain ever within the pale of subjective impressions, we know that the material world by which we are surrounded is a reality, and that the images in the mirror of the soul are not mere phantoms. We know



this because of the Laws. The laws of the mind alone establish the certainty, the safety, the very sanity of our existence. And if this is true of the laws of mind, so far as they relate to external things, and we may wholly trust them thus far, how much more then shall we trust that highest law which we call the Moral Law, which is naught but the supreme expression of law, the law universal, and believe that it, too, corresponds to a reality deeper than all other reality, a reality wiser than we can tell, truer than we can ever demonstrate.

But you will say that this is abstract speculation. Let us then leave aside abstract speculation and draw plain conclusions. The theory of Theism cannot be proved by any syllogism; the theory of Pantheism is still less demonstrable, since its fundamental proposition, as in Spinoza's system, is a mere assumption. Also, it may lead to dangerous consequences, inasmuch as it encourages the belief that all that is is right—injustice, therefore, and baseness and selfishness being in a measure justified, since they, too, are outpourings of the divine fountain-head. And lastly, Atheism—well, truly, if that means the denial of a being conceived by superstitious mortals in the image of themselves, a “big man” above the clouds, then the sooner we accept Atheism the better. But then some of the greatest and truest teachers of religion whom mankind to-day honors and loves, yea, celebrates in admiration and in pride, have been Atheists; and we should esteem it no mean privilege to be numbered among the least of their disciples. But if Atheism means—and this, in any proper definition of the word, alone it does mean—the assertion of the rule of chance, the denial of the transcendent importance of morality, the blasphemy against the Ideal,

then is there no system from which we so deeply, so utterly revolt as this.

Long enough now have we kept silence; long enough have we allowed the charge of Atheism to be brought against us with indifference because we believed it to be dictated by personal motives. But there comes a time for breaking silence. The work which this Society has begun is growing. I cannot bear the thought that any of those who are really at heart with us should be separated from us by an odious name, an untrue alarm. I say, then, that the charge of Atheism as directed against this Society is false, and I am compelled to fling back the charge upon the very head of those who most persistently urge it. For in an age like ours, big with tremendous problems, requiring brave warners to stir the moral sense of the people and hard workers to clear away the Augean heaps of wrong—who, then, are the godless ones?—they who with whatever weak effect and limited strength put their shoulders to the wheels, striving to raise the car of progress from its age-long rut, or they who loll by the wayside, rehearsing an ancient liturgy, repeating for the ten thousandth time some threadbare text, themselves panderers to the prejudices which they should curb, themselves worshipers at the unclean shrine of Mammon? Atheists indeed! Is this a time to dispute concerning Atheism? To waste energies on matters of creed at all? Is there not *work* that cries out to us that we shall do it? Is not this a time for all to help who can help in whatever name they choose to do so, to bring the immediate and most manifold relief that is needed, and to fill the great wants of humanity that have too long, too long been neglected? Ah! but workers we must have. That will be the main test

of religious teachers, that they really work. The people must be aroused, their eyes must be opened, their indignation must be stirred, that they may drive the drones of dogma from their pulpits and place there leaders who will lead them to the good.

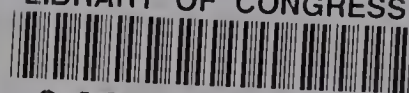
The people want a confession of faith, I am told. Hear, then, mine—a simple one. I believe in the supreme excellence of righteousness; I believe that the law of righteousness will triumph in the universe over all evil; I believe that in the law of righteousness is the sanctification of human life, and I believe that in furthering and fulfilling that law I also am hallowed in the service of the unknown God.







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